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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study reports on the practices of a sixth grade American Indian teacher at an urban charter middle school for American Indians. The study used classroom observations, interviews, and informal conversations over a 3-week period to determine and understand the personal and institutional influences on her instructional practices. The teacher used a teacher-centered style of instruction. She placed herself at the front of the classroom, used a textbook, and engaged the children in a pattern of initiate-respond-evaluate. This reflects the way she was taught in early and postsecondary schooling; the in-service training she received at the school; and the structure of the school itself, which is unaltered from the traditional secondary school. Despite the teacher-centered methods, her students had much autonomy due to her efforts to establish trust and responsibility. Charter schools provide the opportunity for American Indians to take control of their children's education and create schools outside government bureaucracy. However, this study indicates that simply providing community control and incorporating Indian content in a charter school does not ensure innovation. Educators must change not only what is taught, but also how and where it is taught and the school structure itself. Since many states require certification of charter school teachers, teacher education programs should enable teachers to recognize, teach, and respect different ways of knowing and learning. (Contains 24 references.) (TD)

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Charter Schools for American Indians

Brian Bielenberg

The charter school movement is a reform through which American Indians can gain back their sovereignty, a way in which they can step forward on their own behalf and on behalf of their children. However, the existence of such schools alone is not enough, as is shown in this paper through a small-scale ethnographic study of an urban charter school serving students from some 30 tribes. This study indicates that despite the best of intentions, it is often difficult to change common mainstream educational practices. Rather than simply changing what we teach, it is necessary to look more deeply at how we teach and how we structure the learning environment. Taking such issues into consideration can provide America Indian children with the education they deserve and the education indigenous people, both urban and rural, have been requesting for over a century.

> In effect, the Indian has rejected the American educational system because it first rejected him: Indians have desired education, but within a system that includes the home and community in the educational process. It is through this process that Indian children learn their tribal language, custom, tradition, religion, and philosophy. If the Native American Indian appears to be apathetic about supporting the efforts of his children to succeed in school, it is not because of hostility to the educational process, but rather because of his rejection of the narrowness of the system that controls the education process.
>
> (Otis, 1972, p. 72)

The poor quality of education that American Indian and Alaska Native children have received over the past century has been well documented in a number of scathing reports (1928 Meriam Report, 1969 Kennedy Report, 1988 Report on BIA Education, 1991 Final Report of the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force). The inequity that continues today is evident in current demographic data. American Indian/Alaska Natives have the highest dropout rate of any ethnic group in the country, reported to be as high as 45% (Dingman, Mroczka, & Brady, 1995). They also have some of the lowest academic achievement levels as measured by mainstream standardized tests, lowest rates of school attendance, and lowest rates of participation in post-secondary education of any minority group. Their attrition rate at the post-secondary level is well over 70% (Pavel et al., 1998, p. 3-21). The inequities do not exist only in education. American Indians and Alaska Natives have a much greater incidence of tuberculosis than the general population, a higher rate of alcoholism, greater incidence of diabetes, and a suicide rate many times higher than that of the general public. While education cannot be

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blamed for all of these injustices, there is no doubt that past policies aimed at assimilating American Indians and Alaska Natives into the mainstream culture is a major cause of these health problems. These policies, coupled with widely held views of American Indian and Alaska Native children and their families as being culturally and even cognitively deficient, have played a significant role in leading to the current situation. In the past, and unfortunately even today, many educators have assumed that these children must change and/or be changed to conform to the mainstream education system. Seldom have educators accepted the blame for failing the children, acknowledging that it may be the educational system itself that must be altered. When a group of people such as American Indians is considered inferior by the mainstream society, as has been the case throughout history in the United States, it often leads to detrimental effects on the self-image of the minority people and, in turn, to subsequent social ills. The consequences are great economic and social cost to all groups involved, both the majority and the minority.

The educational system that for so many decades sought to destroy Indian cultures, languages, values, and people must now help to undo the damage of the past. It must be transformed in such a way as to provide a means by which to help American Indians overcome the great social injustices of the past and those still encountered on a daily basis today. It must become a system that includes the student, home, and community in determining what the educational process will look like. Educators can do this by focusing on reform of schools, classrooms, how we teach, and how we view learning. In particular we as educators must understand and accept that there are many ways of learning and knowing. The charter school movement is one current reform that offers great potential to accomplish these things in American Indian and Alaska Native communities by allowing for the relocation of the seat of power and control of education into the hands of the community, free of the rules and regulations determined by outside agencies.

But does change come about simply by relocating the seat of control and creating a community-based school? How easy is it to change how we perceive and practice education? These are the questions that arose out of the observations reported in the following pages. In this study I document the teaching observed in a charter school designed to serve American Indian students in an urban school setting. The answer revealed is that putting control of the education of American Indian children in the hands of parents and "the community" is helpful, but not necessarily enough. Although such actions help to provide a comfortable place to learn with teachers who understand and relate to the students, this in itself does not ensure innovation or better quality education than previous school programs. The reasons for this, I argue, include the centuries of colonial education, its structures, and its "culture"; that is, the Western educational institution, what is often referred to as the "grammar of schooling" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Institutions are massive entities that involve many traditions that have come to be accepted as natural and that are not easily changed. How a teacher views teaching and learning, the expectations students, parents, and com-

munities have of schools, and the beliefs of all about how schools should be run and what a "real school" is are deeply entrenched norms that are not often questioned by the people being served. But it is these very structures that must be reformed in order to provide American Indian children with supportive and culturally appropriate education. The traditional beliefs about what schools are and how they function are the very thing that must be changed. The findings outlined in this paper point to some of the deep seated "norms" that all of us must question if we hope to improve schooling. It is hoped that through a discussion of what was observed in this classroom Indian communities will see the great potential for reform as we enter the new millennium: the potential to bring about "true Native education" (Charleston, 1994) in Indigenous communities through a movement that frees communities and educators from the outside rules and regulations that so often stifle education.

The charter school movement

It is valuable to situate the observations of this study within the broader context of the recent development of charter schools. The central tenets of charter schools include autonomy (especially from some state public school standards), choice, accountability, and high degrees of local involvement. The principles behind charter schools, in fact, seem tailor-made to address the calls for greater local control and culturally and linguistically relevant programs that have been heard repeatedly from Indian parents and communities.

The first seeds of the charter school movement were planted by an Eastern educator named Ray Budde, who promoted the idea that school districts should provide educators the opportunity to create the kind of public school that would make sense to them. The idea was eventually picked up by a Minnesota senator, refined by educator reformer Ted Kolderie, and adopted by the Minnesota legislature in 1991. The past decade has seen tremendous growth in the number of charter schools from the first in Minnesota in 1992 to nearly 1,700 today. Charter schools specialize in serving unique populations of students, "particularly those typically underserved" (CER, 2000, p. 120). Several incorporate a mission specifically designed to improve education for American Indian/Alaska Native students. Charter schools empower teachers, reduce reliance on rules and regulations, promote equal access, utilize a nonsectarian curriculum, and provide choice and options for educators, parents, and students (Diamond, 1994). The Center for Education Reform (2000) provides the following definition for a charter school:

> Charter schools are independent public schools, designed and operated by educators, parents, community leaders, educational entrepreneurs and others. They are sponsored by designated local or state educational organizations who monitor their quality and integrity, but allow them to operate freed from the traditional bureaucratic and regulatory red tape that hog-ties public schools. Freed from such micromanagement, charter schools design and deliver programs tailored to educational

> excellence and community needs. Because they are schools of choice, they are held to the highest level of accountability–consumer demand.

Essentially, charter schools provide the opportunity for a community to create educational choices that best meet its needs. They can work towards excellence rather than compliance and set their own student achievement goals. They can be tailored to match the socialization and educational goals of the local community, as defined by the local community. Funding for these schools is received through the district or state and is according to average daily attendance (enrollment). The Federal government helps fund charter schools through the Department of Education's Public Charter Schools Program. The Federal monies can be used for planning, development, and start-up costs. Charter schools are also eligible to receive Federal education funds on the same basis as other public schools, including Title I, Title VII, and Title IX monies.[1]

Owing to the recent nature of this reform, it is difficult to judge the success of the charter school movement, but certain things cannot be denied. Charter schools provide a forum for experimentation with new and different educational strategies. The Little Hoover Commission Charter School Study (March 1996) reported that "There is ample evidence that innovation is the norm rather than the exception at the charter schools, successfully fulfilling the charter law intent of encouraging new methods." Charter schools often involve smaller class sizes, a focused mission, and strong parental involvement. They may be located in traditional or nontraditional settings. According to the California Network of Educational Charters (CANEC), charter schools allow communities "to develop the type of schooling that meets their unique needs" (CANEC, 1998). The Hudson Institute's 1997 report *Charter Schools in Action* found that charter schools are havens for children who did poorly elsewhere. Nearly half of the students who were doing "poorly" in their previous schools are now doing "excellent" or "above average" work in charter schools. Today, the purposes of charter schools are to encourage student learning, meet high standards, encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods, and create new opportunities for teachers, parents, and students (Bierlein & Mulholland, 1994; CED, 2000), essentially the purposes first put forward by the Minnesota State Legislature in 1991.

As of June 1999, 36 states and the District of Columbia had charter laws on the books. The specific provisions in each state's law determines how many charter schools will open and how independent they will be. The Center for Education Reform offers a comprehensive evaluation of all charter school laws through their website, grading them on a scale of A-F as a function of how well they foster numerous, genuinely independent charter schools. Arizona was determined to be the state with the strongest law. Its law allows for an unlimited number of charter schools, three public agencies that are empowered to authorize charter schools, and the ability of virtually any individual or organization to petition to start a charter school. Arizona has allocated $1,000,000 in start up funds. Full funding follows students to charter schools, and they are exempt from many state regulations.[2] The California charter school law, as another ex-

ample, ranked eighth overall and also received a letter grade of A. Its law is somewhat more restrictive than Arizona's in that it requires state certification of all charter teachers. Additionally, it provides for only two possible sponsoring chartering authorities, and district regulations may apply in some circumstances. Although the underlying assumption of charter schools is the need for autonomy in order to be innovative, Wohlstetter, Wenning, and Briggs (1995) have shown that many states have written legislation in such a way as to prevent radical decentralization. Still, charter schools provide one of the best opportunities to implement deep educational changes.

Charter schools appear to have the support of both Republicans and Democrats with President Clinton stating a desire for 3,000 charter schools by the year 2002 and the Republicans wanting even more. The federal government has invested more than $400 million in charter schools since 1994, and President Clinton has requested $175 million for charter schools in fiscal year 2001. Clinton also recently announced the release of $16 million in new grants and $121 million in continuation grants for charter schools (Clinton, 2000). Such funding will aid the establishment and expansion of charter schools to serve students of every background and ability, including American Indian and Alaska Native students. The time is ripe for Indian students, parents, educators, and communities to work together in partnership to establish schools that will meet the expressed goals and high standards of the Indian communities. The charter school movement is a window of opportunity for Indian communities to reassert and regain powers of self-determination and self-education. However, it will take much more than local control of schools to undo the injustices of the past and unlearn the deeply ingrained "natural truths" of educating American Indian and Alaska Native children (Lomawaima, 1999), as demonstrated in the following classroom ethnography.

Teaching in an American Indian charter school

Educational reform often calls for changes in the way teachers teach, with the ultimate goal being to make teachers more effective in helping students to learn. For many years, especially during the recent era of the "back to basics" movement, it was assumed by many that one could understand teaching through reference to a checklist of traits of teacher effectiveness (Cohen & Barnes, 1993). To extend this idea to teaching Indian children, it was assumed that if you focused on certain learning styles or used the "right" strategy, the children would be successful. This position, however, usually fails to take into consideration the context within which the teaching takes place (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1990) and the effects the context has on how a teacher teaches. Deep understanding of why a teacher teaches the way s/he does requires a different approach to teacher research, an approach that allows one to cross into the many domains of a teacher's life. Such research includes observing what the teacher does in the classroom, listening to what s/he has to say outside of the classroom, and, most importantly, looking at the multiple layers of context in which the teacher performs his or her duties. In so doing, one can begin to uncover the different layers in the particular case at hand.

This study is intended to be a brief entry into this type of ethnographic teacher research. It is an attempt at understanding how personal and institutional influences affect one particular teacher's instructional practices within the context of a charter school specifically designed for American Indian students in an urban setting. The goal is to identify the influences on this teacher's instructional practices as a means of highlighting aspects of teaching that all who work with American Indians and Alaska Natives must question and examine on a personal and institutional level.

The Teacher: The instructor observed and interviewed in the charter school of this study, Bernita Hobson (Apache),[3] is a middle-aged American Indian woman in her third year of teaching. During the course of the study, I began to understand Bernita's teaching better as I learned more about her past. Therefore, I find it useful to detail her background before entering into a description and analysis of what was observed in her classroom. Her history is one that is familiar to many Indian teachers, and thus I believe that her case has much to say.

I first met Bernita approximately one year before this study began through an after-school program I was setting up for the charter school. I often talked with her about education for American Indian children and was impressed with her desire to provide them with an education that takes into consideration the culture and ways of knowing associated with American Indians. It was a desire built upon her own experiences. Bernita describes her early encounters with education as "nothing but negative." According to her, "They [her teachers] were downright cruel to children of color. We were treated so badly that most of us just didn't even want to go to school. Most of my friends never did finish school." Yet Bernita did finish and soon was raising children of her own. When they reached school age she found that "To just send them off to school, to wave good-bye at the door, was not natural." So she became a regular volunteer at her children's school. She wanted to know what they were doing and what they were being taught, and she wanted to be sure that they were respecting their teachers. As she put it, "You know, first respect education, second respect your teachers. My being there was important for them, not for me." I interpret this to mean that she felt that her being at the school served to reinforce for her children the importance of education, an importance rooted in the widely held belief that education is the way out of poverty.

During the early years of volunteering Bernita survived mainly on welfare as her husband was often unemployed or not around. After several years of volunteering, she was offered a position as a teacher's assistant. By the end of that school year, she knew that she liked what she was doing. During an "acknowledging day" for the teacher aides at the end of the year she made an important realization. Some of the women acknowledged that they had been serving as aides for seven, ten, and even 19 years. Recounting this story, Bernita recalled that "I looked at her (the 19 year teacher aide veteran), and I thought, you know what, in 19 years if I go to school even a quarter time I could come out a teacher." And she never lost that thought. So when she returned home the following year she went back to college at a state university to begin work toward a teaching credential.

In 1996, the same year Bernita earned her credential, approval was given by the State Board of Education for an urban Indian charter school. She was excited about the thought of teaching there, but didn't feel ready for a school with limited staff as well as students who had been failed by the public system. She began to look for a job elsewhere. A week before the school year was to begin she still had not found a position because, as many principals told her, she "had no experience." Fortunately, the director of the Indian charter school had heard of her and called to offer her a position. Even though she still felt insecure about her abilities as a teacher, she took the position.

Data Analysis: Since I had been volunteering my time at the school for nearly eight months prior to this study, I knew the setting and students. The children in the classroom were familiar with me and thus we all felt quite comfortable as I sat amongst them at a desk and jotted notes. The analysis that follows focuses on a period of three weeks in the Fall of 1998 in which I carefully observed and documented Bernita's teaching. Observations took place during Monday and Friday mornings and Wednesday afternoons and included time devoted to geography, literature, and physical education. During observations notes were jotted down concerning the type of activities taking place, the actions, behavior and interactions of the teacher and students, and the materials being used. Fieldnotes based on memory and jotted notes were composed within three hours of leaving the school. During observation I generally sat at one of the unoccupied student chairs at the back of the room, often with children on either side of me. The children readily accepted me into their classroom as evidenced by their willingness to include me in their activities. This began with the first observation when they asked me to share a story during oral storytelling time and continued from that point onward. During physical education period I was often a participant. Other sources of data include an open-ended, loosely structured, audio-taped interview with the teacher, several informal conversations with her, and two informal discussions with the director of the school. The interview was conducted during the second week of observation. The informal conversations took place at various times and proved to be a valuable sources of insight.

Data analysis involved several re-readings of my fieldnotes in order to identify the general instructional practices used and the regular patterns of Bernita's classroom. I examined the transcription of the interview in order to identify personal and institutional influences that may have led to these practices. Informal conversations were used to fill in missing information that I felt would help to clarify the various factors influencing how Bernita taught in her classroom.

The Setting: The school in which Bernita's sixth grade classroom is located is an urban charter school with an explicitly defined mission that is discussed with all parents, students, and teachers at the beginning of the year. The school's mission is to "meet the academic, social, cultural, and developmental needs of American Indian and other students." The school serves approximately 80 students in grades 6-9. Nearly 80% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunches and 65% live in single parent households. The school is housed in an

old church building located in a neighborhood that was described to me as "run-down and somewhat dangerous." The grounds are littered with trash, piles of used wood, and old church pews. A large cross is prominent on the front of the building next to the painted name of the school. The inside of the school has recently been repainted, and there is little or no graffiti. Still, it seems dark and dingy. Several lights are inoperative and there are boxes piled in the corners. The hallway walls are decorated with posters of famous American Indians, but this does little to distract attention from the double padlocks on the plywood classroom doors. The inside of the sixth grade classroom is tightly packed with 22 chairs with folding tablet arms lined up in three rows. The teacher's desk is in the back corner of the room surrounded by boxes and filing cabinets. Lining two walls are eight brand-new computers that are covered and not used. Over the computers are more posters of American Indians, all, except one, being male. At the front of the room is a Dry Erase white board with the date written in the upper right hand corner. A clock is displayed in a prominent position above the board.

The Findings: As I rode public transportation to the school the first day I was to observe, I was excited about the prospect of viewing innovative ways of educating Indian children. What I encountered was an instructor with textbook in hand standing in front of 21 children nicely lined up in rows, raising their hands to solicit the right to speak.

The typical mode of instruction in Bernita's classroom followed a pattern of teacher directed reading and/or structured questioning in the Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (IRE) pattern identified by Mehan (1982). This pattern is typical of what is found in a majority of teacher-centered classrooms. In examining the interactional sequences that constitute the instructional phase of the classroom lesson event, Mehan noted a repeated three-part sequence involving the reply to an initiation act followed by an evaluation of the reply. Typically, the initiation and evaluation are provided by the teacher, with the student giving the response. Quite often the initiation involves the asking of a question to which the teacher already knows the answer. At times the sequence is extended if the expected reply is not received. When this occurs, owing to lack of answer, a partial answer, or an incorrect answer, the initiator has several choices: S/he may choose to repeat the initiation act, simplify the initiation act, or prompt the responder for the correct answer. In any of the situations, the sequence is completed with the evaluation, as will be seen in the fieldnote excerpt below.

The beginning of each class typically found Bernita at the front of the room with a textbook or her notes in hand. She began each session by asking what the class had been working on the previous day. This request was typically met with over half of the students raising their hands, some halfway out of their seats trying to earn the right to give the correct answer, indicating an eagerness to learn and actively participate that contradicts the often referred to stereotype of the Indian child as silent and reclusive. If reading was involved, each passage was sure to be followed with a low level recall question about what had just been read. At no time was any open ended discussion established. When ques-

tioning students, Bernita always seemed to have a particular answer in mind. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes is very typical of the types of interaction I observed in this classroom:

> (10/19/98) 10:06 a.m. Bernita, standing in front of the class, writes "Lesson on Prewriting" on the board, underlines PRE and asks if anyone knows what PRE means. The first student she calls on answers "Brainstorming" (This is actually what the lesson is to be about). She responds by saying, "You are way ahead of me. Can anyone tell me what 'pre' means?" Several students attempt various answers such as "a long time ago" that are close and are good descriptions of the idea of PRE, but she simply says "No" and continues to probe until someone says "Before," to which she replies "Yes!"

As in this fieldnote, Bernita almost always searched for a specific answer to her question, extending the IRE sequence in ways quite similar to those discussed by Mehan. She controlled the flow of activity and served, along with the textbook, as the source of knowledge. Her methods fit quite well with the Western concept of education in which the students are viewed as empty containers into which the teacher, as possessor, will pour the knowledge.

Whole group introduction to the new topic or lesson was typically followed by individual seatwork guided by the questions provided at the end of the chapter or section in the textbook. During this time Bernita would move from student to student to check their work, generally placing her hand on their shoulder and providing words of encouragement such as "You always make such a good effort" or "I'm so proud of you." Bernita's role thus was not only that of source and authority over knowledge, but also of provider of encouragement and positive reinforcement. Research has indicated learners tend to base much of their motivation for learning on the affective relationship with the teacher, and this is a core part of Bernita's teaching philosophy, although her belief arises not from theory and research, but through lived experiences. Cajete points out that "Native American learners will respond more readily to personalized encouragement coupled with guidance and demonstration from the teacher" (Cajete, 1999, p. 143).

The pattern of instruction Bernita uses in her classroom arises from both personal and institutional influences. Foremost among these influences is the fact that Bernita teaches in the way that she has been taught. In talking about her own education, Bernita recalled that most teachers she has interacted with, both as a student and as a colleague, have tended to teach in a similar manner, beginning in primary school and continuing into post-secondary education. Bernita earned her credential from a state university in a program whose methods have been described as "drill, kill and a credential mill" by an instructor at the same university. Her credential program was a matter of learning the facts of how to teach, as told to the students by the teacher-authority. The results of this can be seen in her own use of carefully scripted lessons and textbooks that lay out the

facts children are to learn. Her classroom, like those in which she was taught and trained, is predominately teacher-centered. Decisions about what is to be learned are made by textbook publishers and other adults; children, those most affected by the decisions and possessing great curiosity about a variety of topics, are not consulted. The traditional structures of the educational system, and Bernita's experiences within them, have certainly influenced her own style of teaching.

A more recent influence, which affirms this mode of instruction, comes through the in-service training the charter school director regularly conducts. These in-services, which are intended to convey the director's curriculum and philosophy to the school staff, primarily involve the director telling the teachers about his curriculum and how he wants it taught; the director talks at the teachers. Bernita describes the in-services as very informative, a great source of information. The information, not surprisingly, is provided in the way that she teaches. The director often lectures about different learning styles by pointing out how two of the teachers take extensive notes, another takes only general notes, while a fourth just listens and observes. According to the director, this indicates differences in learning styles. It also explains Bernita's answer for why she teaches the way she does. When asked if children learn in different ways she replied, "Yes, that is why I lecture so much, so that those who learn orally can listen and those who learn visually can see what I write."

A final determining factor in how Bernita teaches arises from her lack of confidence in content area knowledge. Informal conversations revealed that Bernita is unsure of much of the content of the courses she is teaching, and therefore relies on the textbook for information. She generally ignores students' questions that go beyond what is explicitly stated in the book, discouraging critical and investigative thinking during the teaching of academic subjects. It is interesting to note, however, that Bernita's instructional method completely changed during the physical education period. Bernita freely admits that she is not athletic and knows very little about sports. However, rather than tightly controlling the structure of activities as in the formal classroom, she allows the children to determine and teach the physical education (PE) curriculum, herself becoming a student-participant. In the three weeks I observed formally at the school I saw the children organize football and basketball games as well as teach the other children Capoeira, jump roping, Kung Fu and dance steps. During this period the children are in charge of the entire curriculum, from deciding what will be taught to how it will be taught. It changes the entire character of the class. In this situation Bernita was comfortable letting the students determine what they were interested in, and they were highly motivated. Despite obvious successes of allowing student-centered, student-driven learning to occur, such policies did not transfer back into the other subjects.

Collegial Influence: The teachers at this particular charter school do not have a preparation period, and most were observed to leave the school almost as quickly as the students at the end of the day. Still, Bernita has been able to catch glimpses of other teachers' classrooms and commented on how she likes the

hands-on learning that is done by one teacher. This indicates that some of the teachers have been exposed to other ideas, but there is no school wide implementation of such innovative methodologies at this charter school. Aside from a common belief in featuring Indian studies as part of the curriculum, the teachers appear to be on their own. When I asked Bernita if she talks with other teachers about how to teach students, she answered that there really isn't any time to talk.

In spite of this lack of time for collegial interaction, Bernita has picked up some teaching strategies. On my fifth observation of the classroom, Bernita mentioned to me that she had observed another teacher playing Bingo as part of a science lesson. The students seemed to enjoy it, so she decided to try the game as a way for children to study their weekly vocabulary list. Interestingly, the playing of Bingo followed the same IRE pattern of instruction present in her normal lessons. Bernita stood at the front of the room reading the definitions of words. The students were all seated at their individual desks, covering the words that they thought matched the definition. When one student called out "Bingo," Bernita walked to his chair and checked his card saying "Yes, I did that one" and "No, I haven't given that one yet." There was never any discussion about the ambiguity inherent in some of the definitions, nor were the students allowed to explain why they thought a given word matched a given definition.

Trust and Responsibility: Despite the fact that Bernita controls the flow of the academic activity and is, along with worksheets and textbooks, the final authority on knowledge, the children in this classroom have a good deal of autonomy. This arises from Bernita's belief that trust and responsibility are necessary components for learning to occur and that trust is a major component in behavioral interactions. Research supports the belief that it is especially important for teachers to find ways to build trust (Erickson, 1987).

Bernita seeks to establish trust and responsibility by a number of means. First and foremost is to give children responsibilities such as obtaining material from other teachers and taking lunch counts to the office. Their role of choosing PE activities also fits into this category. Furthermore, Bernita allows freedom of movement in the classroom. Students were often observed getting up to sharpen their pencils or to obtain supplies from the back cabinet without asking permission. This freedom of movement rarely led to any disturbance, even if Bernita was at the front of the room talking.

Discipline was only enforced when a student showed disrespect for another child, a teacher, or for someone's property. The general policy was to send the offending child to a corner of the room to stand with their nose to the wall. Some parents have complained of this method arguing that it is reminiscent of boarding school tactics, but the principal supports her because it gets results, meaning a decrease in disrespectful behavior. According to Bernita, "Hard and quick, Indian way is if you're going to teach them, you teach them with one lesson." Although Bernita claims that this is the "Indian way," many would disagree. Cajete (1999) summarizes an idealized Native American concept of discipline as rarely being direct punishment or personally demeaning. Rather, behavior is regulated through group and peer pressure: "Withdrawing approval, expressing

shame, and reflecting unacceptable behavior back to the individual are the main forms of punishment in the traditional Indian context" (p. 143).

Bernita's primary goal is to create a classroom where everyone feels safe, trusted, and is trusting of others. She reinforces appropriate behavior with phrases such as "I'm so proud of you" and "I'm happy I can trust you." Bernita's description of her favorite teacher is a source of influence for this behavior. He was a teacher who had good rapport with the students. He "was more like a good friend than a teacher. He made class a comfortable place to be." Open friendliness and sincerity help to ease tension in the classroom. This is what Bernita tries to convey to the students in her classroom. The following excerpt from my interview with Bernita demonstrates the importance she places in trust:

> It goes back to trust. When Erica came in she wasn't very trusting. But she turned out to be the best student. She can't take notes, but when we'd go over something she'd be the first to raise her hand. She can't remember dates, but she knows concepts. If she was at a public [non-charter] school I don't think she'd have a chance. I think she would sit in the back of the room and just stay quiet. Trust is the most important, without it learning will not take place.

Assessment: Assessment is a necessary and potentially useful part of the education process. Bernita and the other teachers in the charter school all follow a portfolio assessment model prescribed by the director of the school. Files are kept on each student with examples of student records and evaluations. Traditional paper and pencil exams form one part of the assessment process, which also incorporates more general scaled assessments on such topics as critical thinking skills, social development, and cultural understanding and empathy. The school's plan was to send these ratings home as the way of reporting academic progress, but the parents were uncomfortable with this idea and insisted on the issuance of letter grades. In this situation the parents' familiarity with the traditional forms of grading in the broader institution of school decided the final form of reporting assessment. The school also continues to use standardized tests for district and state reporting requirements, although this may change in the next few years as new performance-based assessment methods are adopted by the state. Perhaps as schools in general come to accept newer forms of assessing and reporting student progress, students and parents will become more familiar with new models of assessment and accept them more readily. However, as Fox points out, "understanding the methods and purposes of these new forms of assessment challenges both educators and the general public, partly because the topic is so politically and morally charged. The old paradigm is deeply entrenched" (Fox, 1999, p. 162). It is likely, though, that as charter schools establish local goals and curricula that are culturally and linguistically relevant and focus more on a model of education that views the students as constructors of knowledge rather than empty containers to be filled, new methods of assessment will be required, adopted, and accepted. As communities begin to decide

for themselves what they want Indian students to learn, many of the current assessment tools used on a national basis will become obsolete. In fact, recipients of several types of Federal funds are already being required to have performance-based assessment systems in place by the 2000-01 school year.[4]

The Curriculum: One of the most telling points about Bernita's teaching came during an informal conversation we had. I had noticed that a number of children at the school and in her class were not of American Indian heritage. This was, in part, a result of district requirements that charter schools allow open enrollment. In fact, one student in Bernita's class and his family were from Cambodia. I asked if this changed what and how she taught. Her reply went straight to the point: "No, I still teach my same curriculum."

The mission of the school is to meet the academic, social, cultural, and developmental needs of American Indian students. For the director, parents, and teachers involved with this school this means inserting American Indian literature, cultural studies, and history into the curriculum. While the content is different from what is taught in most public school, there is little evidence that other aspects of the structure of schooling has changed to better meet the needs of the children. Culturally appropriate curriculum has been defined as a curriculum that "uses materials that link traditional or cultural knowledge originating in Native home life and community to the curriculum of the school" (Yazzie, 1999, p. 83). But what happens when your students come from a variety of tribal backgrounds and range from traditional to highly assimilated? This is certainly a major issue in urban settings such as the one observed in this study, and it is likely to be an issue even in some of the fairly isolated Pueblos of the Southwest. There is no idealized, homogenous group of Indian children, especially in urban areas. The charter school at which Bernita teaches has chosen to deal with this problem by incorporating a sort of Pan-Indian curriculum that can be applied to anyone who attends the charter school. Rather than originating in the home, the concepts for the curriculum are strongly driven by the understanding of Indian culture of the director and teachers of the charter school. At the time of this study over 30 different tribal groups were represented in the student body. Perhaps this approach is the only one that can work in such a situation, but the concept of Pan-Indian stereotypes is not something accepted by all. Lomawaima (1999) resists generalizations about American Indians "because so many stereotypes rest on the mistaken assumption that all Indians are alike" (p. 5). As more charter schools designed to meet the needs of urban Indians are opened this issue will need to be examined in much greater detail. As with all charter schools the answers to what should be included must come about from extended discussion with the community and especially parents.

To extend the discussion of curriculum, it is useful to point out that it does not include only what is to be taught. It also should focus on how the content should be taught, when it is taught, where it is taught, and how it is organized. The structure of this charter school, which certainly affects the structure of Bernita's classroom, is unaltered from the traditional secondary educational institute. Students move from classroom to classroom for different subjects. Stu-

dents are separated by grade, and courses continue to be inserted into 55 minute time-slots. Literature books are put away before the geography books are taken out. Very little of the education takes place outside the walls of the school building. In a very telling way, the structure of the institution of Western, Anglo-developed education holds great sway over how Bernita teaches. Bernita and the school at which she teaches are certainly making an effort to provide an education that is respectful of American Indian culture, and the students are responding positively to being in a predominately American Indian environment with American Indian teachers. The staff has gone beyond the belief that these children come to school with deficiencies as a result of their background, choosing instead to view what the students bring to school as resources. However, much of how Bernita teaches continues to mirror the structure of the assimilationist schools in which she was educated. Graded classrooms and 55 minute periods for separated subjects are key components of this system. Graded classrooms, in which children are placed in different grades and follow structured curricula, were modeled on the division of labor and hierarchical supervision common in factories (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). They were set up for pedagogical efficiency and ease of reproduction. All students could be taught the same subject in the same way at the same pace. Such a system, which is now considered part of what "real schools" are, limits the opportunities for peer teaching, flexibility, and adaptation to individual differences, components that many argue should be part of Indian education.

The 55 minute periods and separated subjects that are part of the curriculum at this charter school are the result of a group of elite Euro-American males who got together in 1906 to determine a way to regulate what a college and university were and what was required to be accepted into one (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Their defining of requirements for entrance to universities in terms of the number of units of specific subjects studied led to the development of departmentalized classes and remains an integral part of the education system today. But does it have to be a part of the education system for Indian children? Most American Indian tribal philosophies do not view the world as separated parts, but rather as an interwoven whole. The current structure of secondary schools makes teaching and learning through holisitic means quite difficult.

Much of what Bernita does in her classroom and the way that the charter school at which she teaches is organized can be traced to what are widely perceived to be natural truths of what schools are. It appears that these ways are accepted as natural rather than the product of history, a history which has ignored the ways of knowing of the original inhabitants of this land. The organizational framework of the school, in particular, shapes how Bernita teaches. Bernita's basic style of positioning herself at the front of the classroom, using a textbook, and engaging the children in a pattern of Initiate-Respond-Evaluate matches with set norms as well as her descriptions of how she was taught both in early and post secondary schooling. It also matches the modeling she receives from the director of the school during in-service training. The lack of opportunity to interact with other teachers and the traditional type of teacher education

program she was trained in have limited her exposure to other possible models of how to teach.

Her background as an American Indian plays a large role in how her classroom functions and helps her to overcome some of the structures of the institution by affecting how she interacts with her students. For her, school was a negative place, and this is the last thing she wants her students to experience. She wants the students to feel safe, trusted, and trusting of those around them. In her words, "without trust, learning cannot occur." While this is an important aspect of making education more appropriate for American Indian students, it is not sufficient to ensure that children are being challenged with high standards. All too often Bernita's teaching remains at the level of recall questioning. She seldom challenges the students to think critically or to construct knowledge. For her, the teacher is still the source of knowledge. This, it must be remembered, is not her fault. It is a result of her teacher training and educational experiences. Much of what Bernita does with her students also arises from the broader institution of education itself. The fact that parents went through schooling and are familiar with structures such as A -F grading makes it difficult to institute alternative means of assessing and reporting student progress. Beyond this, the hidden structures that we often don't even think of affect how Bernita teaches. The school day is divided up into six 55 minute periods, students are separated by grade, and everyone takes a two week break at Christmas. No one in the school questions why this is so or how it affects teaching. These structures directly influence the material presented and the ways in which it is presented. They, in turn, reinforce Bernita's method of teaching. Although both Bernita and the school at which she teaches seek to change the way Indian children are taught, they seem unable to go beyond the traditional structures of schooling. Instead, what they settle for is changing **what** is taught rather than **how** it is taught.

Concluding thoughts

If we as educators of American Indian and Alaska Native students, like Bernita and her colleagues, intend to truly change the way education occurs for Native children, we need to look more closely at both what we teach AND how we teach. We need to question why the school day is structured the way it is and ask if this fits with how a given community wants its children to learn. We need to ask why learning takes place predominately in a school building and not in the community. We need to reflect on how we were taught and compare it with how we teach. And we need to ask the community what they want their children to become as learners and people and begin to model that behavior more completely in the education system.

These ideas are not new, but their full implementation continues to elude us. Nearly ten years ago the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force (INARTF, 1991) recommended several reforms for schools involved in the education of Native children. The INARTF called for the incorporation of Native language and culture in school curricula, increased parental involvement, culturally sensitive teaching practices, and greater local input, most often in the form of community adapted

Tribal Education codes. The goals of these reforms were to increase average daily attendance, lower dropout rates, increase academic achievement, and maintain Native cultures and languages, the same as those of many charter schools. It is my contention, however, that it has been difficult to implement these reforms because of the micromanagement of tribally run schools, whether Federally or publicly funded, that continues to occur through rules and regulations established by non-tribal entities.

Most community run and public schools serving American Indian communities remain to a large degree accountable to state and federal agencies. The charter school movement is different. It provides American Indians an opportunity to create schools outside the bureaucracy of the federal, state, and local governments. It allows them to be free of many of the rules and regulations that have for so long forced upon them an education system that does not acknowledge their language, culture, or ways of educating their young. The charter school movement is a reform through which American Indians can gain back their sovereignty, a way in which they can step forward on their own behalf and the behalf of their children. They can finally have Indian controlled schools with no strings attached, and this goes beyond the publicly stated purposes of charter school legislation. It is a purpose that perhaps only American Indians, knowing their long history of an education system that has primarily sought to destroy their identity, can truly understand.

The purposes behind the current charter school movement, I argue, provide a new opportunity for American Indians to take control of their children's education, this time free of constraining rules and regulations. However, as demonstrated by the ethnographic study of one teacher in a charter school designed to serve American Indian students, simply providing community control and incorporating Indian content in a charter school does not ensure innovation in education. To do this, to achieve "true Native education," educators most look to change not only what is taught, but also how it is taught, where it is taught, and how the school is structured and managed. We must question the very foundations of the institution of Western education and ask which, if any, are appropriate for meeting the goals of a given American Indian or Alaska Native community. Only then can the reforms called for by those involved with educating Indian children succeed. The charter school movement is a tool that can be used to finally provide American Indians an opportunity to regain the sense of sovereignty that has been denied them by the Euro-American educational structure for over 100 years. That this best education can be accomplished by incorporating traditional values, knowledge, and language has been demonstrated by a number of successful programs around the country such as among the Hualapai, Navajo, and Yup'ik. As students are taught in ways that reinforce their cultural identity and values, their self-esteem rises. This leads not only to increased attendance and lower dropout rates, but to greater academic achievement as well, opening the doors to higher education and the ability to live and function effectively in a variety of settings, whether Native, Anglo, or a combination of both.

Change must also occur at a broader level. The charter school legislation of several states requires that teachers be certified by the state. This means that there is a need for the development of teacher education programs that address issues surrounding the different ways of knowing that are often a part of non-mainstream cultures. From ways of viewing the world and thinking about science and mathematics to the structure of storytelling, the culture and knowledge of indigenous and minority peoples are often quite different from the "mainstream." Teacher credentialing should enable teachers to recognize, teach, and respect different ways of knowing and learning. Educators of American Indian and Alaska Native students must demand the institutionalization of courses that will better prepare teachers for teaching diverse students in diverse environments. By developing and teaching such courses and by pursuing research on minority/indigenous education, the quality of education all children receive will be affected by better preparing future teachers for diverse classrooms and thereby preparing citizens for a richly diverse world. Only in a world where all ways of knowing and teaching are respected and valued will we see an end to injustices such as those suffered by the original inhabitants of this country over the past 500 years.

Notes

[1]For more information on how charter schools can obtain these funds the reader is encouraged to consult the Department of Education's website at <http://www.uscharterschools.org/>.

[2]Interested readers are referred to the Arizona Department of Education's Charter school web page at <http://www.ade.state.az.us/charterschools/info/>.

[3] All names are pseudonyms.

[4]For a thorough discussion of performance-based assessment as it relates to American Indian/Native American students and what it may look like in practice the reader is referred to Fox (1999).

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